

Promoting physical activity at work

A guide for employers



Why promote physical activity at work?

Promoting physical activity is part of promoting health in the workplace.

Research has shown that the benefits of improving health in the workplace include:

- increased motivation of employees and a better working atmosphere, leading to more flexibility and better communication;
- a reduction in absenteeism and staff turnover;
- increased quality of products and services, more innovation and creativity, and a rise in productivity;
- improved public image of the company, making it more attractive as an employer.

Physical activity is essential for good health and contributes to positive wellbeing. Many of the leading causes of disease and disability in our society – such as coronary heart disease, stroke, obesity, type 2 diabetes, hypertension, colorectal cancer, stress, anxiety, osteoarthritis, osteoporosis and lower back pain – are associated with physical inactivity.

In Northern Ireland, more than 7 in 10 people do not engage in enough physical activity to benefit their health. For general health benefit, adults should engage in 150 minutes (2 hours and 30 minutes) of moderate intensity activity, or 75 minutes (1 hour and 15 minutes) of vigorous intensity activity a week. Moderate intensity activity is, for example, swimming, brisk walking or mowing the lawn. Vigorous intensity activity includes running, circuit training and playing football. Adults should try to be active every day and each session of physical activity should last for at least 10 minutes.

In addition, adults should engage in muscle strengthening activities on two or more days a week. These activities should work all major muscle groups (legs, hips, back, abdomen, chest, shoulders and arms). Examples of muscle strengthening activities include lifting weights, doing push-ups and sit-ups, and heavy gardening or digging.

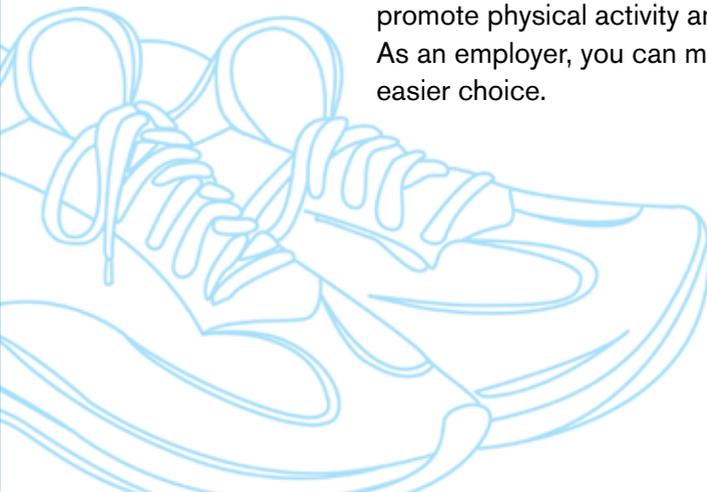
There are **clear benefits** for organisations that have **physically active employees**.

The workplace is an important setting where employees can increase their levels of activity to benefit their health and protect against the most common health problems.

- Employees who are physically active report less illness and recover more quickly from the illnesses they do get.
- Employees who engage in physical activity have reported greater enjoyment of their work, improved concentration and mental alertness, and improved cooperation and rapport with colleagues.
- Being more physically active helps people to manage stress, back pain, weight and medical conditions.

Musculoskeletal disorders (including back pain) and stress are the two leading causes of work-related health problems. By increasing the physical activity levels of employees, absenteeism and the other ill health costs resulting from these common problems can be reduced.

Any organisation, large or small, can take action to promote physical activity and gain the benefits listed. As an employer, you can make the healthier choice the easier choice.



What action can be taken?

Physical activity levels can be increased through simple activities and changes.

Being physically active is not just about sport or formal exercise. Workplaces can be active places without having to include a gym. There are many simple ways to promote physical activity at work.

Employers could support or promote the following:

- walking to colleagues' desks instead of using internal telephones or email;
- taking the stairs instead of the lift;
- observing the recommendations for frequency of breaks and using these breaks as opportunities to be active;
- parking of cars at the far end of the car park;
- walking or cycling all or part of the way to and from work;
- going for a walk at lunchtime;
- purchase of pedometers to measure the number of steps taken in a day with the aim of achieving 10,000 steps a day, and even organising a workplace pedometer challenge;
- taking part in events such as Bike to Work day and local fun runs;
- organising a lunchtime activity group, eg walking, cycling or swimming;
- organising a company sports team, eg football or netball, to play matches against other local workplace teams for motivation.

By providing information and facilities for employees, your workforce can be more physically active.

Employers could provide information on physical activity opportunities:

- local facilities, activities, groups, and clubs;
- the Highway to Health walking routes – an exercise incentive scheme that provides signs placed at 1 km intervals on popular walking routes. More information is available at www.walkni.com/walks
- the National Cycle Network in Northern Ireland – a network that provides safe and convenient routes for everyday transport and leisure journeys. More information is available at www.sustrans.org.uk
- the Waymarked Ways Network – a network that ranges in length from 32km to 65km, with routes fully marked. More information is available at www.walkni.com or www.activitybrochuresni.com/#Waymarked_Way_Guides

Employers could consider providing:

- flexible working arrangements to facilitate physical activity;
- changing and shower facilities;
- a relaxed dress code for those cycling/walking to work;
- cycle parking facilities;
- bicycles or cycling safety equipment. If an employer provides an employee with a bicycle which is used for work purposes the employer will not pay tax or National Insurance Contributions on the cost of the bike. Please contact HM Revenue and Customs for further details;
- a cycle mileage allowance for staff cycling on company business.

Developing a workplace travel plan

This plan can **increase** the level of **physical activity** of employees and provide **business benefits**.

A workplace travel plan helps businesses and organisations explore options to reduce car dependency for commuter and business travel, and promote transport choice.

Some aspects of a workplace travel plan can also encourage employees to be more physically active, eg cycling and walking to and from work, for all or part of the journey, provides an opportunity to fit physical activity into daily life. In addition, looking at other measures, eg public transport and flexible working arrangements, can bring real benefit to your business or organisation.

The benefits of implementing a workplace travel plan include:

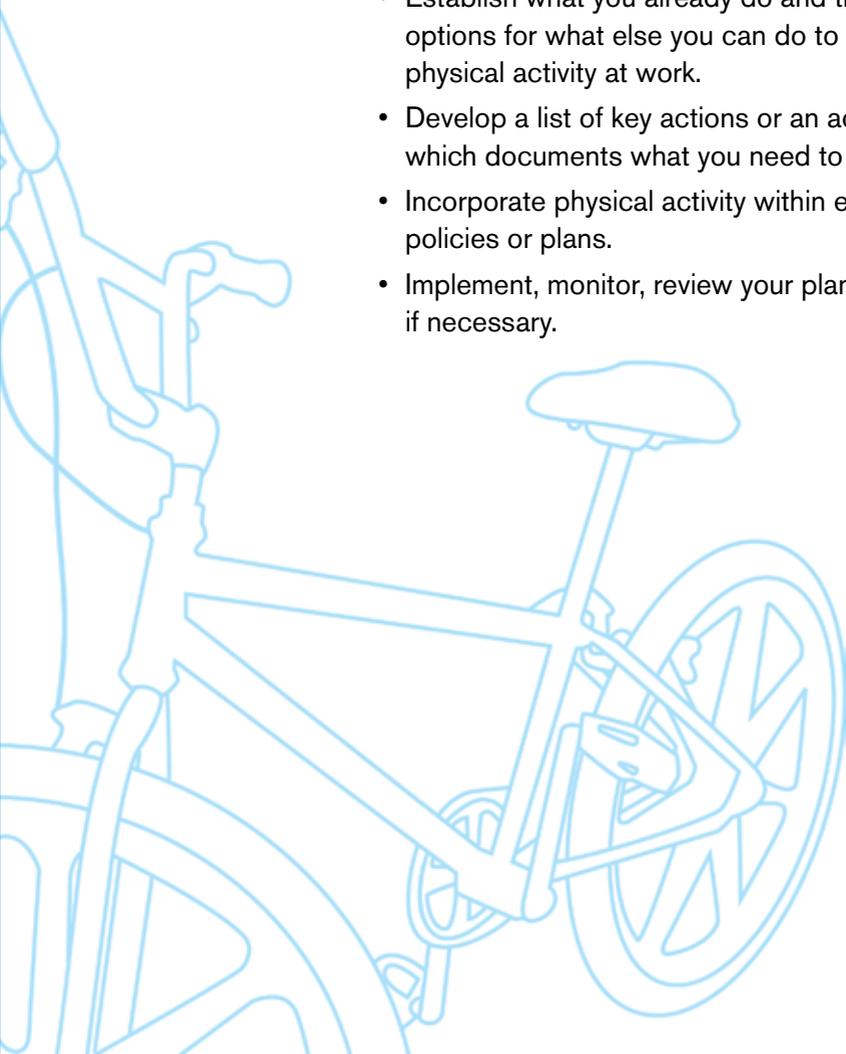
- a reduced demand for car parking and the associated costs;
- a reduction in the time and cost of staff stuck in traffic jams;
- improvements to staff recruitment and retention by making it easier and less expensive for staff to get to and from work;
- improvements to corporate image with staff, customers and suppliers.

Further information is available at www.travelwiseni.co.uk

Key steps for action

For successful change, **consult, communicate and plan.**

- Talk to local organisations which can help you promote physical activity at work.
- Depending on the size of your organisation, set up a working group.
- Consult, communicate and involve everybody in your workplace including management, employees and trade unions.
- Establish what you already do and then discuss options for what else you can do to support more physical activity at work.
- Develop a list of key actions or an action plan which documents what you need to do.
- Incorporate physical activity within existing policies or plans.
- Implement, monitor, review your plans and amend if necessary.



Help is at hand

Supporting the health and wellbeing of employees involves assessing their needs. The Public Health Agency has an online health assessment tool, available at: www.healthatworkni.org

To find out more about workplace health and wellbeing support, visit: www.publichealth.hscni.net/publications/health-and-wellbeing-work-resource-guide

For information leaflets on promoting physical activity, contact the central health promotion resource service in your local Health and Social Care Trust (HSCT) area. Details can be found at www.publichealth.hscni.net

For advice on physical activity and local opportunities, contact your local council, tourist information centres or the physical activity coordinator in your local HSCT.

These websites may also be useful sources of information:

www.outdoorrecreationni.com

www.dardni.gov.uk

www.walkni.com/walks

www.drdni.gov.uk

www.sustrans.org.uk

www.travelwiseni.co.uk

www.choosetolivebetter.com

www.nhs.uk



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